

## **The origins of human morality**

published as *Cradles of morality, Resurgence*, 302:44-5, 2017

While two boys struggled in raging flood waters in Australia in 2011, Jordan Rice aged 13 begged their rescuers, "Take my bother first". They rescued 10-year-old Blake, but Jordan drowned. His cry was like the late MP Jo Cox's call to her friends, when she was fatally shot twice with exploding bullets and stabbed 15 times. She urged them not to try to help her, but to escape to safety. Such examples cause many to wonder, "How might I react if extreme life-death moments force me to reveal my true self: with selfish demands for help or with generous compassion for others?"

Many accounts see human nature as basically selfish. This view seemed to be confirmed in Britain and the USA recently, when politicians won by inciting millions of voters to defend their own interests, their housing, income and employment, at the cost of driving immigrants into destitution and great danger. Donald Trump's election as president begs questions about common human morality. Do many or even most voters admire a man who promotes lies, greed and fearful hatred? Or do they at least tolerate and support him in the hope he will promote their wellbeing against those they see as their rivals? In a moral paradox, do they value his brazen honesty about his low moral standards over many politicians' glib evasions and false claims that they care about the disadvantaged majority?

For centuries, experts have endorsed beliefs about original sin, recently morphed into the selfish gene. Are we innately amoral or pre-moral if not immoral? The Quakers believe there is "that of God in everyone". Yet the Quaker R S Peters, a leading philosopher of education writing into the 1980s, appeared to exclude children under-7-years from "everyone". He pondered how "barbarian" children "ruled perhaps by bizarre and formless wishes" and lacking "knowledge of right or wrong" might "overcome their passions and self-love" and learn to respect others. How can teachers "sustain and cultivate a crust of civilisation over the volcanic core of atavistic emotions" in the infants' "twilight world" he wondered.(1)

In this view of the origins of human morality, children must be taught and socialised into becoming moral persons. Gradually they must learn "right from wrong" and study to follow the rules, laws and habits set by religious and political leaders. The good child obeys the rules and does not ask rebellious questions. Independent ideas about morality are discouraged, as when schools enforce "zero tolerance" of any breaking of the unquestioned rules.

Many other authorities discourage questioning of the moral order. University research tends to set morality aside, to be neutral, scientifically objective and value-free. So, for instance, researchers can list the problems for children living in poor families, but should not ask biased questions about politicians' moral choices that advance social inequality. Similarly, the BBC supposedly handles information neutrally, with balanced presentations that favour neither particular side however truthful or misleading, just or unjust they might be. Politicians and business leaders avidly enforce the values of cost-effective profit, as if obeying a supreme, impartial, unquestionable moral law.

The tradition that morality is learned obedience risks seeing well-educated and successful people as more moral than disadvantaged ones. Yet there are countless people with little education but great kindness. However, in Kant's philosophy, kindness is not necessarily moral. A mother's love for her children or her neighbours may count as self-rewarding self-interest, or unthinking emotional instinct. In contrast, Kant's true moral altruism is a self-denying rational decision to do good to others at no personal gain. This echoes the earlier

view, which separates morality from human nature, as if morality is an impersonal, hard, unrewarding, unnatural and somewhat alien but highly civilised and valued human duty.

Yet what kind of beings would we be if we did not instinctively want to do good and enjoy doing so? To reduce human nature to “authentic, amoral animal biology” in contrast to our “synthetic, acquired social and moral life” denies the intensely social and spiritual qualities in human nature that create moral societies and cultures.

Humans can no more exist outside morality than fish exist out of water. Attempts to side-step questions of power and justice endorse moral indifference and relativism. They imply that suffering does not really exist or matter. They reorder the world into other moralities of prudence, profit, utility, rule-keeping or performance. We worry about what price our “social capital” will fetch. Then older virtues of human “kindness, courage, civility, loyalty, love, generosity and gratitude” are replaced with calculating self-interest and avarice.(2)

Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman (3) and others saw great dangers in unquestioning moral obedience. They believed that the German Holocaust revealed three main human types who showed the extent of human good and evil: the cruel perpetrators, the bystanders, and the few brave protestors. Ordinary good people commit evil when they obey orders, transfer responsibility up the hierarchy, and fail to see victims as persons. Morality is then the rare courage to resist and protest against unjust and cruel majority views, in compassion and solidarity with oppressed people.

Instead of favouring obedience that assumes actions are evil if they are against the rules, Arendt and Bauman believed that rules should only be made if they prohibit actions that are evil. This transforms beliefs about good and evil, right and wrong, from the edicts of remote authorities and unquestioned traditions into our everyday challenging, questioning, living realities, our human nature and conscience, actions and relationships.

Bauman asked, where do concepts of morality come from if they are all somehow imagined and invented? Who invents them, how and why? As mentioned earlier, the idea that morality must be imposed on primitive child savages implies that an alien morality works against human nature. Yet morality has direct meaning and urgency to us all. It protects the self and others when it is rooted in vulnerable, needy human nature, our interdependence and long, dependent childhood, when it promotes human flourishing and reduces suffering.

Morality can then be seen as authentic and integral to human nature, rather than synthetic or arbitrary. However, if morality is partly innate rather than wholly acquired, when do we begin to be moral agents? Bauman wondered if there might be “pre-social grounds of moral behaviour”. If so, he thought, we would need radical revision of ideas about “the origins of the sources of moral norms”. He did not pursue these ideas, which raise the questions, what does it mean to be human and when does human moral life begin?

To enlarge morality beyond verbal thoughts into human activity can recognise moral awareness in the preverbal early months of life. Beyond words, morality inheres in emotions, relationships and actions, in which babies engage from birth. Nevertheless, to imagine that babies have any notion of justice or goodness seems unrealistic. And yet they clearly express moral emotions of pleasure in relationships, trust and love and, if harmed, fear and mistrust.

Paul Bloom at Yale University showed films to babies of puppet-like geometric shapes acting well or badly in hindering or helping one another. He analysed micro-second-videos of babies’ gaze and their responses of attention and surprise. He concluded that babies from 3-months-old judge the goodness and badness of others’ actions, and soon they show

empathy and compassion. They try to soothe those in distress, and have a rudimentary sense of justice. Most 6- and 10-month-old babies in the study reached for the helper puppet over the hinderer puppet. Bloom and many others consider that human altruism has developed over millennia into an innate capacity. This is supported by Frans de Waal's research on other moral mammals, on natural selection, and on our mutual needs for common survival. Offspring of supportive parents are more likely to survive.

Moral humans are not simply good. They consciously struggle with good and bad impulses. Bloom argues that through developing their innate reason, imagination and compassion, children develop their rudimentary morality. The 6-month-old baby I observed who generously passed around a soggy nibbled biscuit she had enjoyed to share with her family faced a life-time of learning and refining her morality. Yet older people are not necessarily more kind or moral than young children, who can be extremely loyal, generous and forgiving. Like other complex pack and herd species we are intensely sociable, wanting to relate, share and communicate. We have the additional human capacity for self-conscious and imaginative guilt, regret and shame unlike, as Darwin said, swallows who are not haunted by remorse if they leave their fledglings and migrate in the autumn.

Instead of schools trying to teach children "to learn right from wrong", deep knowledge they already have, schools could respect, draw on and nurture this innate human understanding and critical capacity for independent moral judgment. The judgement 13-year-old Jordan Rice fully understood.

- (1) Details in Alderson, P (2003) *Institutional Rites and Rights: A Century of Childhood*. London: Institute of Education.
- (2) Gouldner, A. (1977) *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- (3) Bauman, Z. (2003) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity.

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